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ABSTRACT

Japanese preschool children begin to read at home at age four without any formal instruction or reading readiness programs, and the development of their reading abilities in the preschool stage is mainly up to the parents. A new reading program will be needed for the sake of children with parents who are not sufficiently concerned about reading. Although the reading ability of preschool children today has become higher than ever before, we should not overlook the fact that there are still some children who do not read any letters upon entering elementary school. Since ability grouping or the double-promotion system is not accepted in Japanese education, an elementary school teacher necessarily encounters larger individual differences than ever before in his classroom, which in Japan usually contains an extraordinarily large number of pupils. Coping with the big differences is the main problem in Japanese reading instruction on which further and urgent strategies are essential. (Author)

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READING OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN IN JAPAN

Session, May 3, "Coping with differences in early childhood"

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Publications for Preschool Children

The Publication Yearbook which was published in Tokyo in 1973 reported that publications for preschool children have recently increased in number and in quality. According to the yearbook, about 400 new titles of books and 40 different magazines for preschool children were published in Japan in the year 1972. It is surprising that this many books and magazines were bought by parents and read by preschool children. These books are usually called picture books because they have mainly pictures with only a small amount of letters. Recently, however, picture books which emphasize letters or stories have been published and have sold well. The majority of picture books published now in Japan are what we call "story picture books" with rather long stories, some of which are original Japanese works and others are Japanese versions of foreign classics. Many of the foreign classics are not only translated into Japanese but also re-written for preschool children. It would be better to call them Japanese preschool versions of foreign classics. There are quite a few of them; "Heidi," "Little Princess," "Little Lord Fauntleroy," "Gulliver's Travels," and so forth. Although some people are against this kind of preschool version because it spoils the beauty of the original work, these versions are widely accepted by parents because of the importance of letting young children experience joy through books. Besides story picture books, there are what we call in Japanese "animal picture books," "vehicle picture books," "daily life picture books," "knowledge picture books," "monster picture books," and "TV picture books." Statistics tell us that parents of preschool children buy 2 or 3 of these picture books a month. Magazines are also liked by preschool

children and the most popular title sells more than one million copies a year.

All these books and magazines are printed in Hiragana only, which many preschool children can read.

Reading of Hiragana

Hiragana, which is one of the writing systems used in Japan, is a set of phonetic symbols. Each symbol in Hiragana system is monosyllabic without meaning by itself. With few exceptions, each symbol has only one phonetic pronunciation. Since the relationship between written symbols and spoken syllables is so very regular, learning of Hiragana is not difficult. The number of basic symbols in Hiragana is 46. With the 46 symbols, plus other marks that give additional phonetic values, we can make up all the 71 letters of Hiragana and can write any word or any sentence in the language.

Japanese children enter elementary school at six years of age at which time the Ministry of Education requires that they start to learn Hiragana letters. But in fact, many children begin to learn Hiragara before school age without receiving any formal instructions, probably in their daily life through books, magazines, toys, TV programs and other means with the help of their family.

The National Language Research Institute of Japan published a big report in 1972 entitled Reading and Writing Ability in Preschool Children. This is the final report of their nation-wide survey conducted in 1967, which consisted of three major parts:

(1) A survey of reading and writing abilities of preschool children in Japan,

(2) Follow up studies of some preschool children with high abilities, and

(3) A survey of reading and writing instructions at Japanese kindergartens.

Concerning the reading of Hiragana letters, the report concluded;

(1) Many preschool children in Japan begin to learn Hiragana at the age of four.

(2) When the test was given to four-year-old children who were 17 months away from entering elementary school, those who could not read Hiragana at all were only 9% of all the surveyed children, while 53% of them read more than 21 and 34% read more than 60 Hiragana letters out of 71.

(3) When the test was given to five-year-old children who were to enter elementary school in five months, only 1% of all the investigated children could not read any of the Hiragana letters, while 82% of them could read more than 21 and 64% of them read more than 60 Hiragana letters out of 71.

(4) In the city area, 88% of preschool children read more than 60 Hiragana letters out of 71, one month before entering elementary schools.

(5) Girls read better than boys.

(6) In the case of a child with exceptionally high reading ability, the child could read not only all the Hiragana letters but also 563 Kanji characters before school age.

From these findings, we might say that Japanese children start learning Hiragana at four years of age, and that their reading abilities get considerably high before entering elementary schools.

Another interesting fact that the report pointed out was that the level of children's reading abilities in 1967 was higher than that of 1953. In 1953, when the children were tested in the first month of their elementary school life, they read 26.2 basic Hiragana

symbols on average out of 46. In 1967, however, five-year-old children, who were tested five months before entering school, read 36.8, and even the four-year-old children who were tested 17 months before entering school read 24.4 basic Hiragana symbols on average out of 46. That is, the four-year-olds in 1967 could read approximately as many Hiragana as the first graders in 1953 could.

It is believed that parents' concern for the reading of their children is one of the most important factors in preschool children's reading. Recently, mothers' concern has increased greatly due to the facts that (1) the proliferation of appliances in the home has given them the leisure to pay more attention to their children, and (2) the importance of mental development in the preschool age has come to be more widely recognized.

According to a report by Sugiyama and others, 36% of the surveyed preschool children's parents, usually mothers, began to read books to their children at one year of age, 31% of them began when the children were two years old, and 23% of them at the age of three. Those who had not read to their children until four years of age were only 7% of all the parents. This report also concluded that the earlier the parents began to read, the more fluently the children could read by themselves when they were five years of age. In case the mother's concern for the reading of her child is insufficient, the child's reading development is slow.

Parents, however, do not actually teach children to read letters. To the question "How did your child learn to read," those who reported that they positively taught them were less than 20% of all the surveyed parents, 2094 in number, according to the report of the National Language Research Institute previously mentioned above. What the

majority of the parents usually do is, to give the children picture books, give them Hiragana blocks (which are bought by about 70% of the parents), read books to them, and answer their children's questions about letters, all of which are more important than teaching them letters in a lesson-like situation.

Although letters or characters are formally taught in less than 20% of all the Japanese kindergartens, a great amount of written Hiragana can be seen in most kindergartens, and children's questions about letters are answered by almost all teachers. We might say that the usual steps in teaching preschool children to read Hiragana at home and at kindergartens are to give children numerous chances to see Hiragana at an early stage and arouse their interest in letters, and to answer the children's questions about letters.

Reading of Kanji

Kanji characters are ideographs that originally came from China. They are, therefore, often called Chinese characters from literal translation of the term into English. Kanji, however, are not completely Chinese but today are very typically Japanese. They are read differently and the significance of some characters in Japan is entirely different from that of the Chinese. Because they are ideographs, each Kanji has its own meaning, and they are therefore quite numerous. Presently, however, they are officially limited to 1850 characters for daily use. The learning of Kanji is more difficult than the learning of Hiragana not only because Kanji are more numerous but also because, unlike Hiragana, each Kanji usually has several alternative readings that range from monosyllabic to quadrisyllabic sounds.

The Ministry of Education presently requires 996 Kanji characters

to be learned during the six years of elementary school curriculum and 854 during the three years of junior high school, so that children complete the learning of all the 1850 Kanji for daily use in the nine years of their compulsory education. Thus, children come to be able to read standard Japanese sentences in which there is a combination of Kanji and Hiragana, where 25 to 35% of the total number of characters are written in Kanji and the rest in Hiragana.

It has long been believed that children do not begin to learn Kanji unless they completed the learning of Hiragana and that Kanji is, therefore, difficult for preschool children. There is some evidence recently published, however, which contradicts this belief. The results of a survey conducted by myself in 1972, for instance, shows that, of the 317 5-year old kindergarten pupils surveyed, only 14% could not read any of the tested 32 Kanji characters five months before entering elementary school. The rest of the children could read at least one Kanji. An average child could read six Kanji and 17% of all the children could read no less than one half of the tested 32 Kanji. It is certain that these children learned this amount of Kanji without any formal instructions, since Kanji had never been taught at the kindergarten where the survey was conducted.

Mr. I. Ishii, an experienced teacher of Kanji in elementary school, began his activities of teaching Kanji at kindergartens in 1968. According to his experiment, the most suitable age for children to start learning Kanji is three years old. He says an average child can learn more than 500 Kanji and a brighter one can learn about 1000 Kanji before school age, if the child is taught properly at age three. One of the main principles of his program, the so called Ishii program, is to arouse children's curiosity or interest in Kanji. He suggests

that kindergarten teachers not hesitate to present Kanji to children even when they can not read at all. Another principle of the Ishii program is repetition. Children must study a certain Kanji over and over again. Although the Ishii program is rather intensive and hard to follow perfectly, it has been accepted by more than 200 kindergartens since 1968.

The results of experimental studies have never failed to agree with Mr. Ishii, at least in that the children who were taught at kindergartens could read much more Kanji than those who were not taught at all. In my experiment, for instance, the experimantal group of five-year-old children, who were taught about 150 Kanji for one year, could read an average of 50 Kanji characters ten months before entering elementary school, while the control group children of the same age, who were not taught any Kanji at all, could read an average of only 5 characters.

Although they approve the efficacy of teaching Kanji at this stage, many of the researchers as well as the educators who are interested in early reading, are not necessarily positive in their assessment of the Ishii program. They worry whether or not too much emphasis on this sort of intellectual activity at the preschool stage distorts the sound development of the child as a whole. Further investigation and consideration is needed on the problem of teaching Kanji to preschool children.

Summary

Japanese preschool children begin to read at home at age four without any formal instruction or reading readiness programs, and the development of their reading abilities in the preschool stage is mainly up to the parents. A new reading program will be needed for

the sake of children with parents who are not sufficiently concerned about beginning reading.

Although the reading ability of preschool children today has become higher than ever before, we should not overlook the fact that there are still some children who do not read any letters upon entering elementary school. Since ability grouping or the double-promotion system is not accepted in Japanese education, an elementary school teacher necessarily encounters larger individual differences than ever before in her classroom, which in Japan usually contains an extraordinarily large number of pupils. Coping with the big differences is the main problem in Japanese reading instruction on which further and urgent strategies are essential.